



S. 1315 – Veterans' Benefits Enhancement Act of 2007

FLOOR SITUATION

S. 1315 is being considered on the floor under suspension of the rules and will require a two-thirds majority vote for passage. This legislation was introduced by Senator Daniel Akaka (D-HI) on May 7, 2007. S. 1315 passed the Senate by a vote of 96 to 1 on April 24, 2008.

S. 1315, as amended, is expected to be considered on the floor of the House on September 22, 2008.

SUMMARY

Servicemembers Group Life Insurance: The bill expands servicemembers' group life insurance to include certain members of the Individual Ready Reserve.

Traumatic Injury Protection Coverage: The bill allows servicemembers to designate a fiduciary for traumatic injury protection coverage in the event they become mentally incapacitated or experience an extended loss of consciousness.

**Note: Currently, servicemembers are encouraged to designate a Power of Attorney when they enlist. If one is not designated and a servicemember becomes mentally incapacitated, he or she is unable to file a claim on their coverage.*

Home Improvements for Totally Disabled Members of the Armed Forces: S. 1315 allows the Secretary to furnish improvements and structural alterations to the home of a totally disabled member of the Armed Forces prior to their discharge or release from the Armed Forces.

**Note: Under current law, the Department of Veterans Affairs can provide up to \$4,100 for home improvements and structural alterations to the homes of permanently service-connected disabled veterans. However, there are a large number of servicemembers returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan who have been designated as totally disabled, but because of their ongoing treatment have not been discharged from the Armed Forces and are not yet veterans.*

Coordination of Approval Activities of Education Benefits: The bill requires the Secretary to reduce overlap and improve the efficiency of approval activities for education programs with the Secretary of Labor and the Secretary of Education. It also requires the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to report to Congress on the actions taken to establish outcome-oriented performance standards for State approving agencies within 120 days of enactment.

Recall of Retired Judges: S. 1315 modifies the payment retired judges performing recall service receive by repealing the limit on service for judges who voluntarily serve more than 90 days.

Reports on Court Matters: The bill requires the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims to provide Congress with an annual report regarding the type and number of cases heard by the court. Separately, the bill requires the General Services Administration to conduct a study on the feasibility of expanding the facilities of the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims.

Termination of Cellular Phone Contracts: S. 1315 allows a servicemember who receives orders to deploy outside of the continental United States for not less than 90 days to request the termination or suspension of any cellular phone service contract without incurring an early termination fee.

Study: The bill requires the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies to conduct a comprehensive epidemiological study for purposes of identifying any increased risk of developing multiple sclerosis as a



LEGISLATIVE DIGEST

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result of service in the Armed Forces during the Persian Gulf War in the Southwest Asia theater of operations or in the Post 9/11 Global Operations theaters.

Report: The bill requires the Comptroller General of the United States to submit a report to the relevant Congressional committees on the adequacy of dependency and indemnity compensation to surviving spouses and dependents of veterans who die as a result of a service-connected disability in replacing the deceased veterans' income.

BACKGROUND

According to the VA, there were over 24 million veterans in America in 2007, with over 3.58 million veterans and survivors receiving compensation and benefits under programs administered by the VA for 2006. This included more than 2.7 million veterans receiving service-related disability benefits and over 325,000 surviving relatives receiving service connected benefits.

More than 1,600,000 members of the Armed Forces of the United States have been deployed in Operation Enduring Freedom or Operation Iraqi Freedom since September 2001. More than 30,000 soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines have been wounded in battle.

COST

Preliminary cost estimates from the Congressional Budget Office estimate that S. 1315 would increase discretionary spending by \$6 million over five years.

STAFF CONTACT

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